

The First 50 Women in Idaho Law

REI KIHARA OSAKI

September 15, 1943



Rei Kihara Osaki was born on December 16, 1918 in Wapeta, Washington. The daughter of parents who emigrated from Japan, Osaki grew up on her family's farm in Harrah, Washington on the Yakima Indian Reservation. Her father was a farmer, and her mother a homemaker. Being educated people themselves, they placed great importance on education for their children. "Education," said Osaki, "was talked of matter-of-factly. Some people questioned the value of an education, saying 'Why get an education when you'll only end up working in a fruit stand?' My family believed there was value in education for itself."

When she entered first grade in Washington, Osaki knew only one word of English: elephant. But she quickly learned, speaking English at school and Japanese at home. From an early age, said Osaki, "I wanted to do good, to change things." Initially, she planned to become a medical doctor but switched to law when her mother, who had worked as a nurse in Japan, advised her that medical care was "hard work." "My family was unusual, now that I think about it," said Osaki. "It was not common for women in Japan to train for professional work, but my mother was a nurse, and my aunt was a teacher."

In 1936, Osaki began college at Washington State University and studied political science in preparation for law school. She eventually earned a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science 1940. Given how quiet Osaki was in class, never raising her hand to speak, one of her college professors suggested that she might be more comfortable at a small law school. As such, Osaki decided to apply to the University of Idaho College of Law. By attending college, Osaki escaped relocation during WWII because she was outside the internment area. Osaki said that while she was spared the "real fear, the anguish" her family experienced in being relocated from the family's farm in Washington to Wyoming's Heart Mountain Relocation Camp, she did feel guilty and offered to leave school. Her father refused, saying, "You're the only free person in the family. Take all my savings and finish law school." Osaki did just that and in 1943 became the fourth woman graduate from the University of Idaho College of Law and its first Japanese-American graduate.

Osaki recalls riding the bus from Moscow to Lewiston to take the bar exam in the Nez Perce County Courthouse. Osaki passed the bar exam and was admitted on September 15, 1943 as Idaho's sixteenth woman attorney, and the first Japanese-American woman admitted to the Idaho bar.

After graduation, Osaki "had no home to return to" so she headed east and accepted a position with a real estate office in Elkhorn, Wisconsin. She was there when her father and brother were released from Heart Mountain. Her family had lost more than their freedom during the process of relocation, the family farm was gone. To help her father start over, Osaki not only returned what

remained of his savings to him but also bought him a used tractor. Later, Osaki moved to Chicago to work as a lawyer for the Office of Price Administration. There she appeared in federal district court and the U.S. Court of Appeal - a position she held for nearly three years.

After marrying, Osaki settled with her husband in Pasadena, California, and, she says, “pursuing law was no longer my interest.” Instead, she set her “roots down by getting involved in various community activities, especially partisan politics.” Osaki also devoted herself to her family and is the mother of three sons; she also has seven grandchildren.

Osaki currently resides with her family in Pasadena and says, “I am old enough to reflect on many societal and technological changes over 61 years [since my bar admission] and their effect on our culture.”